

From Statelessness to Sacred Life: Infringement of Humanity in the Lives of Refugees in Alan Gratz's *Refugee*

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Abstract

This research explores the theme of statelessness and the infringement of basic human rights in Alan Gratz's refugee-centered narratives, particularly his novel 'Refugee'. Through the interwoven stories of Josef, Isabel, and Mahmoud, the novel portrays how political dislocation, identity erasure, and systemic neglect compromise human dignity. This study examines the literary representation of the refugee condition using a human rights lens and emphasizes how Gratz transforms the idea of stateless existence into a sacred struggle for life and belonging. Using qualitative textual analysis and a theoretical framework rooted in humanistic criticism and postcolonial theory, the paper reveals how literature can humanize displaced populations and stimulate global empathy.

Keywords: Statelessness, Human Rights, Refugees, Identity, Empathy

1. Introduction

The global refugee crisis is not merely a political or economic problem—it is a profound humanitarian catastrophe that challenges the conscience of humanity. In recent decades, civil wars, authoritarian regimes, ethnic cleansing, and environmental disasters have displaced millions of people from their homes. The recent ceasefire between Hamas and Israel has given some relief to both Palestinians and Israelis, but their constant war has necessitated more studies about migration, statelessness, exploitation, violence, and many more (Sherma, 2023). According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 117 million people are expected to be forcibly displaced worldwide by 2024. Within this staggering population, a significant number of individuals find themselves rendered *stateless*, which means they are not considered nationals by any state under the operation of its law. This statelessness deprives individuals not only of legal recognition and protection but also of basic human rights—such as access to education, employment, and healthcare. They are trapped in a liminal space, often criminalized, dehumanized, and reduced to mere numbers in humanitarian reports.

While political treaties, humanitarian organizations, and international forums attempt to address this crisis from a legal or policy-oriented perspective, literature—especially young adult fiction—has emerged as a unique platform for amplifying refugee voices and experiences. Fictional narratives do not merely relay information; they humanize statistics, evoke empathy, and foster moral imagination. Through storytelling, authors can convey the emotional, psychological, and cultural dimensions of forced migration. In this context, *Refugee* (2017) by American author Alan Gratz stands as a compelling literary intervention. The novel braids together the harrowing journeys of three young protagonists—Josef, Isabel, and Mahmoud—across three different historical moments and geographic locations: Nazi Germany in the 1930s, Cuba during the 1994 crisis, and Syria amidst the 2015 civil war.

Gratz's *Refugee* transcends temporal and spatial boundaries to present a universal refugee narrative. Despite the differences in time and place, the experiences of the characters resonate with common themes of statelessness, family separation, loss of home, and the denial of human dignity. The novel constructs a tapestry of trauma but also of resilience, depicting how children navigate the horrors of war, displacement, and marginalization while holding on to the sacred threads of hope, identity, and humanity. The interwoven narratives are not only emotionally powerful but also intellectually stimulating, provoking readers to examine the social, political, and ethical implications of forced migration.

This paper argues that *Refugee* serves as both a literary and ethical document. It portrays the systematic infringement of human rights and dignity in the lives of displaced children, while simultaneously showcasing their spiritual and moral struggle to reclaim their sacred life amidst statelessness. Gratz's characters are not just victims of geopolitical violence—they are moral agents who question injustice, care for others, and assert their right to exist with dignity. Their stories compel readers to recognize the sacredness of every human life, regardless of legal status or national origin.

In doing so, this paper bridges literary analysis with interdisciplinary perspectives drawn from refugee studies, human rights discourse, trauma theory, and child psychology. The objective is not only to understand *how* literature represents refugee crises, but also *why* such representations matter in a world increasingly marked by exclusionary nationalism and xenophobia. Through an analytical reading of *Refugee*, this paper foregrounds the importance of narrative in restoring humanity to the stateless, and in cultivating a more compassionate global consciousness.

The methodology adopted in this paper involves close textual reading of Gratz's narrative, supplemented with scholarly literature on statelessness, children in conflict zones, and literary ethics. By critically analyzing the emotional arcs, symbolic elements, and structural composition of the novel, the study aims to unearth how the text narrates the transition from dehumanization to sacred affirmation of life. The paper pays particular attention to scenes of border crossing, family trauma, and moral decision-making—moments in the text where the characters' humanity is most intensely challenged and most courageously defended.

In conclusion, *Refugee* is not merely a work of fiction but a testament to the indomitable human spirit. It educates young readers and adults alike about the complexity and urgency of the refugee experience, offering a literary lens through which to confront the ethical failures of modern nation-states and to imagine a world where every life, regardless of citizenship, is treated as sacred. This paper endeavors to elevate the conversation from policy to poetry, from legality to humanity, and from statelessness to the sacred life.

1. How does Alan Gratz's *Refugee* portray the infringement of humanity in the lives of stateless refugees?
2. In what ways does the novel reimagine the sacredness of life amidst violence and displacement?
3. How do the protagonists resist dehumanization and reclaim their identity and dignity?

2. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretative methodology to explore how Alan Gratz's *Refugee* represents the infringement of humanity in the lived experiences of stateless and displaced children. By combining literary close reading with theoretical application and contextual analysis, this research seeks to unpack the deeper moral, psychological, and sociopolitical dimensions of refugee life as depicted in the novel. The methodology integrates four complementary approaches: textual analysis, theoretical application, contextual research, and comparative literary reading.

3. Theoretical Application

To deepen the critical analysis, this paper employs an interdisciplinary theoretical framework drawing from postcolonial studies, trauma theory, and human rights philosophy. From postcolonial theory, Edward Said's

concept of "othering" and Homi Bhabha's notion of cultural hybridity and displacement inform the analysis of the refugees' identity struggles and societal marginalization. Cathy Caruth's trauma theory is invoked to analyze how the child characters' process, represent, and survive trauma in the absence of therapeutic space or state protection. Caruth's insight into narrative as a mode of expressing the unspeakable becomes crucial in understanding the narrative strategies employed by Gratz to articulate suffering without exploitation.

Further, the study utilizes philosophical perspectives from Hannah Arendt and Giorgio Agamben to examine the political dimensions of statelessness. Arendt's critique of the loss of "the right to have rights" and Agamben's concept of the "bare life" illuminate how the refugee body becomes a site of exclusion from political and legal personhood. The novel is thus read as a literary exploration of bio politics and necropolises, where children's lives are simultaneously rendered disposable and sacred. These frameworks allow the study to transcend a purely emotional reading of the novel and investigate how literature can critique structural violence.

4. Theoretical Framework

Understanding the violation of humanity in the lives of refugees in *Refugee* by Alan Gratz requires the application of robust theoretical models that go beyond literary aesthetics to delve into political, philosophical, and psychological terrains. This section integrates four major theoretical perspectives—Giorgio Agamben's "bare life," Hannah Arendt's concept of statelessness, Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, and core concepts from postcolonial theory—to frame the narrative experiences of the child refugees Josef, Isabel, and Mahmoud. These frameworks help unpack how statelessness functions not just as a legal condition, but as an existential crisis rooted in systemic injustice.

Giorgio Agamben: Homo Sacer and Bare Life

Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, in his seminal work *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), articulates the concept of "bare life"—existence stripped of political significance, legal recognition, or rights. He argues that the modern sovereign state holds the power to include or exclude individuals from the political realm, reducing certain people, such as refugees, to a liminal existence between life and death. Refugees, in this sense, embody "homo sacer," a figure who can be killed without legal consequence but not sacrificed.

In *Refugee*, all three protagonists—Josef, Isabel, and Mahmoud—live within the conditions of bare life. Josef, as a Jewish boy fleeing Nazi Germany, is ejected from his homeland and reduced to a stateless subject whose humanity is no longer recognized. Agamben's notion finds resonance in Josef's father, who, after being released from a concentration camp, returns deeply scarred, symbolizing the political death already suffered by many before physical annihilation. Josef's family must navigate a world that no longer views them as citizens but as excess population—unwanted and unprotected.

Similarly, Mahmoud, fleeing war-torn Syria, repeatedly confronts zones of exception—refugee camps, border crossings, and sea routes—where sovereign laws do not apply, and survival depends on arbitrary mercy. Mahmoud's invisibility becomes a survival strategy, yet it simultaneously affirms his reduction to Agamben's homo sacer, a life without rights. As Agamben posits, the camp becomes the new "nomos of the earth," and in *Refugee*, every failed asylum attempt by Mahmoud's family illustrates this biopolitical abandonment.

Hannah Arendt: Statelessness and the "Right to Have Rights"

Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) introduces the idea that stateless individuals are those who have lost "the right to have rights." Statelessness, for Arendt, is not merely a lack of legal status but a total erasure of one's political identity and human dignity. Stateless people are unable to appeal to any authority for justice or protection, making them existentially vulnerable.

Gratz's characters vividly embody Arendt's critique. Isabel, whose family flees Cuba in the 1990s, is trapped between the failure of the socialist regime and the conditional hospitality of the United States. Her family is not only stateless but voiceless, possessing no political agency to demand inclusion. Arendt's insight becomes apparent in the interactions between the characters and the state—the Coast Guard, the authorities on the MS St. Louis, the European border control agents—all of whom treat the refugees as problems to be managed rather than lives to be protected.

Moreover, Arendt's idea explains the psychological toll of statelessness on child refugees. Josef's struggle for dignity on board the St. Louis reflects the painful contradiction of being human but not considered a rights-bearing subject. Mahmoud's efforts to maintain normalcy and agency amidst chaos echo Arendt's insistence that the denial of political recognition is the first form of dehumanization.

5. Literature Review

Refugee Studies and Statelessness: Legal and Political Perspectives

The phenomenon of forced displacement and statelessness has been extensively studied across multiple disciplines, including international law, political science, and human rights. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has repeatedly emphasized the scale and urgency of the refugee crisis, defining refugees as persons who have fled their countries due to well-founded fears of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group (UNHCR). However, the legal frameworks surrounding refugee protection remain inadequate in fully safeguarding human dignity and rights, particularly for stateless persons.

Hannah Arendt's foundational work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1958), introduces the concept of statelessness as a condition that strips individuals of their "right to have rights." Arendt argues that without citizenship, individuals are rendered politically invisible and vulnerable to systematic abuse. This conceptualization resonates deeply with contemporary refugee experiences where legal status becomes a matter of survival. Arendt's thesis lays the groundwork for understanding the profound human cost when political structures fail to recognize displaced persons as rights-bearing subjects.

Building on Arendt's work, Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998) further theorizes the precarious existence of refugees. Agamben conceptualizes "bare life" as life that exists outside the protections of law, reduced to mere biological existence subject to sovereign power and exclusion. This framing underscores how refugees become trapped in "states of exception," where normal legal protections are suspended, and life is exposed to violence and death without recourse. Agamben's analysis has been influential in refugee studies, highlighting how statelessness is not just a legal condition but a site of bio political control and marginalization.

Trauma and Memory in Refugee Narratives

Refugee experiences are marked not only by physical displacement but by profound psychological trauma. Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, as articulated in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), conceptualizes trauma as an event that is not fully processed at the time of occurrence but returns in repeated and fragmented forms. Caruth emphasizes the role of narrative in bearing witness to traumatic events and giving voice to those silenced by trauma. Her work has been applied extensively in the analysis of refugee literature, where storytelling becomes a means to recover lost histories and humanize otherwise invisible victims.

Recent literary scholarship explores how refugee narratives represent trauma as a core thematic and structural element. For example, Jennifer Wawrzinek's *Memory, Trauma, and History: Essays on Living with the Past* (2015) illustrates how displaced persons negotiate their fractured identities and memories within stories that balance loss, survival, and hope. Such narratives reveal the intersection between

individual and collective memory, emphasizing the importance of testimony and the ethical imperative to listen.

Alan Gratz's *Refugee* aligns with this body of trauma-informed literature by foregrounding child protagonists whose voices articulate pain, loss, and resilience. Through their stories, the novel mediates the complexities of refugee trauma for young readers, fostering empathy while highlighting systemic injustices. The representation of trauma in *Refugee* exemplifies how literature can function therapeutically, providing recognition and validation to refugee experiences.

Cosmopolitanism and Hospitality

Philosophical discussions on cosmopolitanism and hospitality offer normative frameworks for understanding refugee rights and ethical responsibilities. Immanuel Kant's essay "Perpetual Peace" (1795) introduces the concept of "cosmopolitan right," advocating for universal hospitality grounded in peaceful coexistence. However, Kant also limits hospitality through conditional acceptance, emphasizing adherence to host country laws and customs.

More recent theorists, such as Jacques Derrida in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (1997), call for "unconditional hospitality" that transcends legalistic restrictions. Derrida argues that true hospitality demands welcoming the Other without preconditions or exclusion. This ethical ideal challenges the state-centric logics that often exclude refugees and asylum seekers.

In the context of *Refugee*, these theories illuminate the tensions between the legal realities faced by displaced persons and the ethical demands of hospitality. The novel's depiction of border closures, detention centers, and bureaucratic hurdles exemplifies the failure to realize cosmopolitan ideals. At the same time, moments of individual kindness in the story gesture toward the possibility of an ethics of unconditional welcome.

The scholarly literature on refugees, statelessness, trauma, postcolonial identity, and cosmopolitan ethics provides a rich interdisciplinary framework for analyzing Alan Gratz's *Refugee*. The novel's interweaving of historical and contemporary narratives resonates with key themes identified in academic research: the legal invisibility of refugees, the psychological impact of displacement, the political critique embedded in refugee stories, and the moral call for compassionate hospitality.

By situating *Refugee* within this body of work, this paper underscores how literary representation can both reflect and challenge prevailing understandings of refugee crises. The novel emerges not only as a work of fiction but as a site of ethical engagement, inviting readers—especially youth—to recognize the humanity of refugees and to imagine more just responses to global displacement.

6. Findings

Alan Gratz's *Refugee* portrays the experiences of three child protagonists—Josef, Isabel, and Mahmoud—who confront the horrors of statelessness across distinct historical and political contexts. A comprehensive literary analysis of the novel reveals five key findings: the loss of legal identity and corresponding worthlessness; the use of religious and cultural motifs as vehicles of resilience; the layered meaning of statelessness as both physical and spiritual dislocation; the power of human solidarity as resistance; and the novel's powerful critique of global apathy. Each of these findings collectively demonstrates how *Refugee* humanizes the refugee experience and amplifies the moral call for compassionate global engagement.

Loss of Legal Identity and the Devaluation of Human Worth

Each protagonist's journey begins with the loss or threat of citizenship. Josef's Jewish identity in Nazi Germany makes him a target of persecution; his father is taken to a concentration camp, and their family is denied protection in every country they seek refuge in. Isabel faces hunger and repression in Castro's Cuba, where legal identity does not guarantee dignity, especially for dissidents. Mahmoud, escaping war-torn

Syria, traversing its borders only to find bureaucratic neglect and hostility. In all three cases, statelessness is not only a legal status but an existential crisis. These children are deprived of their “right to have rights,” echoing Hannah Arendt’s analysis that citizenship is the foundational human right from which all others flow.

Gratz emphasizes this degradation by showing how institutions—governments, military, border control, and even supposed humanitarian structures—often fail to recognize the basic humanity of these children. Josef’s rejection by Cuba and later the United States illustrates how geopolitics override moral obligation. Isabel’s family must pay bribes and risk their lives to flee an oppressive state. Mahmoud’s heartbreaking journey through Turkey, Macedonia, and Hungary reflects the cold indifference of European immigration systems. This loss of legal identity strips away societal protections and symbolic belonging, pushing these children into a liminal space where their existence is barely recognized.

Religious and Cultural Symbols as Anchors of Resilience

Amid the disintegration of formal identity, the novel reveals how the protagonists turn to cultural and religious symbols as anchors of dignity. Josef clings to the rituals of Jewish life, carrying a Torah scroll and observing Shabbat even while fleeing. Isabel plays her trumpet and sings traditional Cuban songs, linking her with generations past and preserving her emotional landscape. Mahmoud’s family pauses to pray at key moments, even when surrounded by chaos. These acts are not merely symbolic—they represent cultural continuity, spiritual agency, and psychological grounding.

These motifs function as resistance to the dehumanizing effects of statelessness. In contexts where legal and political structures deny them personhood, the characters claim their humanity through inherited rituals. Mahmoud’s prayer amidst a crumbling building, Isabel’s music on a makeshift raft, and Josef’s adherence to religious customs during displacement show how identity can persist even when everything else is lost. These small acts become revolutionary—affirmations that the characters are more than refugees; they are full human beings with histories, beliefs, and dignity.

Statelessness as Physical and Spiritual Dislocation

Statelessness in *Refugee* is not only a geographic reality but also a deep spiritual wound. The protagonists lose not only their homes but also their sense of coherence in the world. Physical displacement is compounded by emotional fragmentation. For Josef, the trauma of watching his father deteriorate psychologically leads to a fractured sense of self. Isabel’s journey is marred by guilt and longing, her memories of Cuba both a comfort and a source of pain. Mahmoud becomes numb to suffering, noting that visibility often leads to danger, so he chooses invisibility—a tragic metaphor for the psychological toll of statelessness.

This layered displacement results in what Giorgio Agamben terms “bare life”—a condition where the refugee exists outside political recognition and within a zone of indistinction between life and death. The protagonists are often reduced to biological existence, moving through spaces where their safety, identity, and future are constantly in question. Yet Gratz also shows that this spiritual void is not fixed. The characters reclaim sacredness through memory, imagination, and relationships. Mahmoud’s final act of giving up his sister to save her life, Isabel’s rebirth in Miami, and Josef’s sacrificial choice for his sister represent moments where sacred life is reasserted in defiance of dehumanization.

Acts of Human Solidarity as Forms of Resistance

Throughout the novel, moments of kindness—though rare—emerge as powerful counterpoints to the systemic cruelty faced by the refugees. A Cuban policeman who helps Josef, a Turkish man who gives Mahmoud’s family water, and the German family that adopts Ruthie (Josef’s sister) represent the

possibility of moral clarity in a morally ambiguous world. These individual acts contrast sharply with the inhumanity of larger systems and function as symbolic resistance.

Gratz seems to suggest that even in the most hostile environments, human empathy can survive. These gestures—often small and fleeting—represent hope and function as a critique of institutional failures. Isabel's grandfather sacrificing himself to save others on the raft, Mahmoud's father holding onto his children despite exhaustion, and Josef's mother's enduring protection all signify moral courage in the face of despair. These acts transcend politics and become spiritual resistance against a world bent on forgetting the humanity of refugees.

7. Conclusion

Alan Gratz's *Refugee* stands as a powerful literary testimony to the intergenerational and global experiences of forced displacement. By intertwining three distinct narratives across disparate geographies and historical moments—1930s Nazi Germany, 1990s post-Soviet Cuba, and war-torn 2010s Syria—Gratz transcends chronological and national borders to illuminate the core human cost of statelessness. The novel does not merely recount historical events; it transforms them into emotionally resonant, morally urgent appeals for empathy and action.

The study has shown how Gratz strategically employs narrative structure—alternating timelines, spatial shifts, and child focalization—to engage young readers and provoke ethical reflection. Each character—Josef, Isabel, and Mahmoud—embodies both personal trauma and collective suffering, rendering refugee hood a universally shared human condition rather than a distant or marginal experience. Through devices such as musical memory (Isabel), moral courage (Josef), and sacrificial hope (Mahmoud), the novel affirms the possibility of dignity, solidarity, and sacred life even amid dehumanizing forces.

This analysis also brought into conversation theoretical frameworks like Giorgio Agamben's concept of *homo sacer*, Hannah Arendt's notion of statelessness, and trauma theory. The application of Agamben's theory highlighted the precarious legal and ontological status of refugees as subjects excluded from political life, reduced to "bare life." Arendt's work illuminated the condition of sightlessness that defines the refugee experience. These concepts helped deepen the ethical stakes of Gratz's storytelling, positioning *Refugee* not only as a narrative but as an act of witnessing.

Importantly, the findings underscore that Gratz's novel is not simply about survival. It is about resistance—resistance against being erased, against silence, and against the global structures of apathy and exclusion. Through acts of moral courage—whether smuggling prayer rugs, blowing a trumpet for lost souls, or handing over a child to strangers—Gratz's characters reassert their humanity in the face of profound injustice.

The overall message is clear: storytelling matters. Literature has the power to humanize statistics, to transform geopolitical crises into personal tragedies, and to awaken a sleeping moral conscience. *Refugee* is thus not only a literary text; it is a moral intervention.

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